



William Raspberry

The Watergate Enigma

IT MAY BE that the most frequently asked (and most variously answered) political question in Washington these days is: In light of the spying / cheating/sabotaging scandal in which the Nixon administration's campaign apparatus is enmeshed, how come the President isn't losing any ground to Sen. McGovern?

The question comes most often from people who want the incumbent to lose the election, not so much because they are outraged over the espionage/sabotage scandal but because they are outraged over Richard Nixon.

The answers come from

everywhere, and they vary depending on the respondent's moral values or his grasp of history or on how much he likes or hates Nixon or McGovern.

Columnist Gary Wills sees moral insensitivity to the scandals as not particularly surprising. He accepts the widely held view that "every regime will have a certain amount of graft and hanky-panky," and he is a little amused at his Chicken Little colleagues who are disturbed because the voters won't believe their warning that the sky is falling.

WILLS, WELL-TAKEN point notwithstanding, there does seem to be more of a ho-hum reaction to the Watergate, wheat deals and laundered money scandals than, for instance, to the viscuna coats and deep freezes of two decades ago.

It may have to do with McGovern's inability, due to his campaign style and tone of voice, to capitalize properly on what in the hands of an Ed Muskie or a George Wallace would be fantastic campaign material.

There is something about the McGovern style that makes it difficult for him to get anyone properly alarmed about anything. You get the feeling that if he suddenly announced that the building was on fire, his audience would just sit there, looking vaguely intelligent. They'd believe him, all right. It's just that there's something about his manner of speaking that would have his most avid supporters whispering to each other about how much more effective the fire speech would be if only people would read it.

What may be closer to the truth, however, is that the scandalous material would be exploitable if they involved another candidate than the incumbent.

THERE IS SOMETHING peculiar about the Nixon constituency's attitude toward their man. It's easy to find people who wouldn't give a thought to voting for anyone else, but it is extremely difficult to find anyone who really cares for Richard Nixon as a person,

who sees him as towering moral figure, a model for their sons to emulate.

What they seem to see in him is a master politician whose enemies are the same as theirs. One of Nixon's strengths, in fact, is that he gives a certain legitimacy and dignity to feelings that people used to find a little embarrassing.

He has a talent for making opposition to school desegregation ("forced busing"), housing integration ("forced housing integration") and employment opportunity for minorities ("quotas") seem like legitimate philosophical postures.

His supporters no more expect incorruptibility from him than George Wallace's people expected good grammar.

As a result, things which would have destroyed a national father of the Eisenhower mold or a benevolent prince like Kennedy cause scarcely a nonjournalistic ripple in the Nixon administration. You expect high morality from your moral leaders, but not from your politicians.

The most you ask of them is not to get personally—or financially—involved in the scandal.

And if they are adept enough at making you feel good about your lesser instincts, you might even forgive them a little bit of personal scandal.